

## A Table in the Wilderness

A sermon preached at Niles Discovery Church, Fremont, California,  
on Sunday, October 9, 2022, by the Rev. Jeffrey Spencer.

Scripture: [Mark 6:30-44](#) and [Psalm 23](#)

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As you can see from the logo for the sermon series we are starting today, we're going to be talking about bread for a few weeks. And, you know how when you're thinking about buying a particular model of a car or a particular type of cell phone, suddenly you notice it a whole lot? It feels like suddenly the world is filled with them. The actual numbers haven't changed, but it feels like they have. That happened to me on Facebook this week.

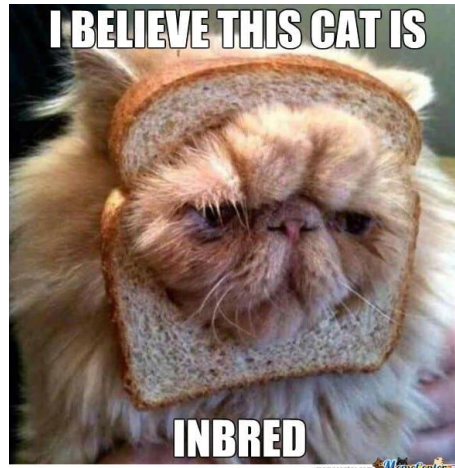
I suppose in the days following the feast of Saint Francis it's appropriate that people were posting pictures of animals. I just didn't expect so many of purebred dogs.



Or purebred cats.



Now this inbred cat didn't surprise me.



And then last night, there was this turtle.



Aren't you glad we got those out of the way?

At the beginning of chapter six of Mark's gospel, Jesus sends his 12 disciples out on a healing mission. When we get to verse 30, they're returning, filled with stories of what happened while they were gone. Apparently, the whole experience was exciting and tiring, because Jesus says it's time to take a break. Jesus suggests they go out to a deserted place, that they go out into the wilderness.

Now, I was taught that the overarching scriptural view of the wilderness was that of a place of chaos and danger. I think what I was taught is largely wrong. It is not chaos and danger people encounter in the wilderness. At least not in the Bible. Again and again, the people in the wilderness encounter God. Jacob has his dream of the ladder between heaven and earth while he is in the wilderness. Moses encounters God at the burning bush in the wilderness. The Hebrews learned how to be God's people after generations of slavery by wandering in the wilderness. John the Baptist called people to encounter God in his wilderness baptisms.

When Jesus invites his disciples to take a break in the wilderness, he's inviting them to come rest in God, the God who's experienced in the wilderness. So they try to go on a retreat in the wilderness. Only it doesn't end up bring much of a retreat. They get to their deserted place only to find a crowd that's excited to see them.

I wonder which of the disciples thought, “Go away and let us be.” I’m sure at least one of them did. It wasn’t Jesus.

He looked at the crowd and felt compassion for them. He saw them as a sheep without a shepherd. And, as [the film](#) we saw during the Time with the Children shows, sheep without a shepherd may end up following anyone who jogs by. The people who gathered there were hungry, and not (at least initially) for food. To start with, Jesus fed them spiritually and intellectually. And then it got late. Then it got to be supper time. And they were out in the wilderness. There was no bakery nearby. What could Jesus and the disciples do about it?

I am a little amused that the disciples – who had just spent several days off on their own healing people, who had had such an amazing experience that they had to talk about it even though they had had no rest and were exhausted – figured there was nothing they could do about dinner for the crowd.

Because they thought they didn’t have the resources to feed the crowd, they asked Jesus to tell the people to go home to get something to eat.

Jesus said, “You give them something to eat.”

“Are you crazy, Jesus? We don’t have enough money to buy the food needed to feed this crowd.”

“Well, what have you got?”

“Ahhhhh, five mini loaves and two little fish.”

“That’ll do.”

What the disciples didn’t understand, and what we’re invited to understand is this: As disciples of Jesus, we have what we need in order to do what he calls us to do.

Let me say that again. As disciples of Jesus, we have what we need in order to do what he calls us to do.

The psalmist understood this: “The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want.” I shall not want. I have what I need in order to do what I’m called to do.

I know it can be really hard to believe you have what you need. 39 years ago, almost exactly, I was one month into the Master of Divinity program at Pacific School of Religion and I was feeling overwhelmed. I was certain that there was no way I had what it was going to take to do this graduate level of study. God had called me to ordained ministry, but there was no way I had the internal resources to do this work. God had made a mistake! And then, at a special service marking the Feast of St. Francis, Jesus took five loaves of bread and two fish – though it looked like some wafers and some wine to everyone in the Chapel. He took it, and he blessed it, and he broke it, and he gave it to all of us. And as I ate, I knew that I had what I needed.

Looking back at that experience, I get a chuckle. I notice, quite clearly now, that Jesus did not say it was going to be easy. All Jesus said was that it was going to be okay. It was going to be okay because I had enough to do what he had called me to do.

This sermon is the first of four leading us to Pledge Sunday. We're talking about stories of the table, stories of bread and cup. We're remembering God's generosity and the invitation to be generous, too. We're remembering God's faithfulness and the invitation to be faithful, too. In today's story, we hear about a table in the wilderness – a table that at first seems empty and ends up overflowing. Jesus tells his disciples to get the people to sit down into communities of 100 or of 50. He tells the disciples to get them gathered around this table in the wilderness and to eat what's been shared.

Now, my rational, modern mind wants to explain the miracle logically. In fact, one of the things I like about how John tells this story is that the disciples don't have the bread and fish. It's a kid. Jesus tells the disciples to feed the crowd and the kid says, "Here. You can have my bread and fish." Maybe his mom, the one who said, "Here, honey, take this with you in case you're out late," is the first hero of this story.

My rational mind wants to say, the miracle isn't that Jesus created fish and bread out of nothing. The miracle is that the crowd saw someone sharing what they had – whether it was a boy or the disciples who did the sharing – and they started to do the same thing. The crowd saw sharing and started sharing, too. And when everyone shared, there was more than enough. In fact, when everyone shared there was so much the disciples had to pick up the leftovers.

Only, I don't think that's what Mark thought. And I don't think that's what the early church thought.

It's very clear to me that this story was universally important to the early church. It was so important that all four gospels tell it, and two of them tell it twice. For them, I think the story was mostly about communion. Look at what God can do with just a little bit of bread and a couple fish. Just look at what God can do. Just look at what God can do when God takes what little bit each of us is.

Whether we understand this story to be a call to pool our resources or a story about allowing ourselves to be broken open for the sake of God's love, it's a story of a miracle. It's a story of transformation. It's a story calling us to the table – wherever we find that table – to be fed ... and then to go participate with God's transforming of the world.

We have what we need in order to do what God calls us to do.

Amen.